

Statement for the Record
United States Department of the Interior
Before the
House Natural Resources Committee
Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands
H.R. 5263, Forest Landscape Restoration Act
July 10, 2008

Thank you for the opportunity to testify for the Department of the Interior (DOI) on H.R. 5263, the Forest Landscape Restoration Act, which establishes a collaborative and science-based forest landscape restoration program that would prioritize and fund forest-based ecological restoration treatments. The DOI strongly supports landscape scale restoration efforts, and believes in the goals of landscape-level approaches to land management. While we do have concerns with the legislation, which are discussed below, we appreciate the sponsors' intent in introducing H.R. 5263 to manage land health on a landscape scale.

In our view, a true ecological approach to restoration begins with a collaborative evaluation of what is best for the health of the landscape and is followed by the engagement of the appropriate partners. This approach is more effective in achieving the mutual goal of improving landscape health which, in turn, improves resiliency to the risk of wildfires and invasive species and preserves key wildlife habitat. It aggregates the investments of the partners and increases the cost-effectiveness of those investments. We would like to take this opportunity to share our current efforts to improve the ecological health of lands through a landscape-scale collaborative approach.

Background

Collaborative landscape-scale treatments continue to be the focus and priority in carrying out land management objectives on DOI-administered lands. It is important for us to look at management from a landscape perspective beyond geopolitical boundaries and isolated ecosystems. Forests, woodlands and rangelands are a mosaic where the lands, resources and communities are all interconnected. From this perspective, we see the interdependence of resources and the need to develop interdisciplinary strategies for balanced multiple-use management across the entire landscape.

Several current activities and proposed programs in the Administration's FY 2009 budget request already promote landscape-level approaches to restoring and maintaining land health that engage a number of Federal and non-Federal partners. Examples of key DOI programs include the Healthy Lands Initiative and the Wildland Fire Hazardous Fuels Reduction Program.

Healthy Lands Initiative – One challenge DOI faces is meeting land health goals that are required to integrate landscape-scale habitat restoration and resource management. Through the Healthy Lands Initiative (HLI), DOI is working collaboratively with our Federal and non-Federal partners to restore, enhance, and protect habitats through landscape-scale restoration initiatives and conservation planning, allowing us to continue to fulfill our multiple-use mandates. HLI considers the health of the land at a landscape scale instead of acre by acre.

Initiated in Fiscal Year 2007, the Department's Healthy Lands Initiative focuses on implementing landscape-scale habitat restoration and conservation projects across both public and private lands. All of the projects implemented under this Initiative promote the maintenance or restoration of healthy native plant communities with the increased ability to survive disturbance events or adapt to anticipated changes in the environment in the future. The Healthy Lands Initiative represents a concept for meeting emerging challenges in managing natural resources for continued multiple-use with flexible landscape-level approaches. Land restoration efforts are targeted toward priority landscapes to achieve various resource objectives, including resource protection, rehabilitation, and biological diversity. A key component of this initiative is the partnership aspect of HLI and working closely with our neighbors to initiate and fund landscape-scale restoration work that allows for continued healthy, working landscapes. The BLM leverages appropriated funding with matching funds provided by other Federal agencies, State, local and tribal governments, philanthropic organizations, advocacy groups, and industry partners.

The 2009 Budget includes a total of \$21.9 million within DOI to meet land health goals, a \$14 million increase over the 2008 enacted level. Within DOI, the BLM has the largest level of involvement in this initiative. In FY 2009, the BLM is requesting a \$10.0 million increase over the FY 2008 enacted level of funding of \$4.9 million, for a total of \$14.9 million for HLI. An additional \$8.2 million in BLM base funding also supports healthy lands. The BLM proposes to expand HLI to California as an addition to the six initial project areas located in New Mexico, Utah, South-central Idaho, Southwest Wyoming, Southeast Oregon-Southwest Idaho-Northern Nevada, and Western Colorado. The Colorado project area will be expanded to the northwestern part of the State in 2009.

Our approach, working with our partners to maintain healthy landscapes, sustain wildlife and maintain continued access to the public lands for multiple uses, supports a landscape-level approach to natural resource management and restoration.

We would like to highlight a few of the many successes and planned efforts that illustrate our ability to conserve the diversity and productivity of the landscape through the opportunities we have in HLI.

- The Colorado Landscape Conservation Initiative encompasses 20.5 million acres of mixed ownership, including roughly 4 million acres managed by the BLM. This area provides quality habitat for diverse wildlife populations, including seven of the eight remaining populations of Gunnison sage-grouse, as well as numerous special status species. The BLM, National Park Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Forest Service, Natural Resources Conservation Service, Colorado Division of Wildlife and private partners are working together to restore, enhance, and protect habitats through conservation planning efforts and partnerships. To enhance existing resources and restore conditions, BLM Colorado's planned actions include implementing habitat treatment projects, implementing effective weed management efforts, expanding native-seed program, pursuing conservation easements, and monitoring treatment effectiveness. This year BLM is spending close to \$400,000 to treat 560 acres of wetlands, 12 miles of

stream, 3,060 acres of shrub, grass, woodland, and 10 riparian projects. In the Fiscal Year 2009 President's Budget request, the BLM is requesting almost \$2 million to treat 1,380 acres of wetlands, 14 miles of stream, 3,110 acres of forest, shrub, grass, woodland, 1,380 acres of weeds, and 27 riparian projects.

- In New Mexico, the BLM is working closely with private, state, and other Federal partners to restore desert grasslands that are being supplanted with invasive mesquite. Removing the mesquite from these landscapes reduces habitat fragmentation for important species such as the lesser prairie chicken and Aplomado falcon and improves the natural diversity of desert grasslands. The BLM treated 40,000 acres in Fiscal Year 2007, is planning to treat 48,730 acres in Fiscal Year 2008, and is requesting almost \$3.5 million to treat 132,320 acres in Fiscal Year 2009. Additional non-BLM acreage is being treated using other contributed funds.

BLM also engages in comprehensive land health treatments through other base activities. For instance:

- The BLM plans institutionalization of landscape-level land health treatments that characterize HLI. In Montana, the BLM is addressing landscape-scale restoration on a 600,000 acre watershed in the southwest part of the state. A recent forest health assessment on a 32,000 acre area, known as the south Tobacco Roots watershed, found that altered forest structure, density and species composition in the mid-elevation forests, of which both Forest Service and BLM are major land managers, is putting these forests at high risk to insect epidemic and catastrophic wildfire. The agencies have been working collaboratively with private landowners, conservation groups, and the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation to begin restoration across the watershed. The DOI planned actions are 4,000 acres of forest restoration sales followed by prescribed burn and 1,600 acres of juniper treatment by prescribed burn. These treatments across the entire watershed will restore the health, resiliency and productivity of the entire watershed and continue to provide high quality habitat, as well as a high quality place to live and work for the people who live here.

National Fire Plan/Healthy Forests Initiative/Healthy Forests Restoration Act - Two major challenges facing DOI are addressing ecosystem health and the accumulation of flammable fuels on Federal lands, a major cause of fire risk. Multiple factors contribute to wildfire, which include weather, fuel type, terrain, location with respect to the wildland urban interface, and other highly valued landscapes, and managerial decisions made before and during fire incidents. As we have noted in past testimony before this Committee, we are seeing changing temperature and prolonged drought across many portions of the West and Southwest along with an expansion of the wildland urban interface resulting from an increase in the number of people living there. Fifty-seven million people now reside within 25 miles of BLM lands, and BLM lands host approximately 58 million recreation visits annually.

As current trends indicate wildfire seasons may be lasting longer and the burned areas are becoming large. Continued accumulation of wood fiber, and substantial increases in highly flammable invasive species, are converging to increase the risk of catastrophic loss from

wildland fires. The DOI, along with the Forest Service and other partners, is addressing cost containment measures to reduce suppression costs. We are also working hard in developing a cohesive approach among Federal partners, local governments, private organizations and citizens to reduce hazardous fuels and restore and maintain forest, woodland and rangeland health. This is being achieved through various initiatives such as the National Fire Plan (NFP), the Healthy Forests Initiative (HFI), and implementation of the Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2003 (HFRA). To date, we have made considerable progress.

Since 2001, the DOI has worked aggressively to reduce the amount of hazardous fuels on Federal lands and restore the health of our public forests, woodlands and rangelands, utilizing the authorities provided under the HFI and the HFRA. Of the 258 million acres administered by the BLM, 69 million acres are forests and woodlands located in the 11 western states. HFI and HFRA have provided the BLM with tools to ensure sound management practices and to implement hazardous fuels reduction projects and stewardship contracting.

The BLM's hazardous fuels reduction and forests, woodlands and rangelands rehabilitation activities have also been guided by the National Fire Plan (NFP). The goals are to reduce fuels (combustible forest materials) in forests, woodlands, and rangelands at risk, rehabilitate and restore fire-damaged ecosystems, and work with local residents to reduce fire risk and improve fire protection. The NFP is being successfully implemented under the leadership of an interagency and intergovernmental group of Federal, state and local agencies working cooperatively to reduce wildfire risk and restore fire-adapted ecosystems. Investments made to restore land health today can have a profound impact on the resiliency of the treated acres to catastrophic and expensive wildfires in the future. Many treatments, such as thinning in forests and woodlands, have an additional benefit of improving watershed conditions, wildlife habitat, and species diversity. Overall, the DOI has applied nearly 8 million acres of hazardous fuels reduction treatments to forests, woodlands, and rangelands on the public lands since 2001, using the tools of prescribed burns, and chemical and mechanical fuels treatments, as well as restored 1.4 million acres through other landscape restoration activities.

The 2009 President's budget proposes \$850 million to support fire preparedness, suppression, fuels reduction, and burned area rehabilitation needs for the DOI. Excluding supplemental funding, this is a \$42 million increase over the 2008 enacted level. The DOI continues to support the Healthy Forests Initiative. The budget proposes \$202 million for hazardous fuels reduction program. These funds will support more high-priority fuels treatment projects. Putting forth the effort to cooperatively reduce wildfire risk and restore fire-adapted ecosystems now will lead to reduced fire impacts and costs in the future.

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The legislation calls for the Secretary of the Interior and the Secretary of Agriculture to jointly establish a collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program to select and fund ecological restoration treatments for priority forest landscapes.

Section 4(c) discusses eligibility criteria for collaborative forest landscape restoration proposal nominations. One criterion is for the proposals to be comprised primarily of forested covered Federal lands, but may also include other Federal, State, tribal, or private land.

Section 4(d) describes the nomination process, requiring the State Director of the Bureau of Land Management or a Regional Forester to nominate collaborative forest landscape restoration proposals for selection by the Secretaries.

Section 4 (g) establishes a fund for the cost of carrying out ecological restoration treatments on covered Federal lands, allowing the Secretaries to use the fund to treat covered Federal lands for each collaborative forest landscape restoration proposal selected. It is unclear if the fund can be used to treat lands outside those managed by the BLM and the National Forest System that comprise a portion of a selected restoration project. The section also authorizes to be appropriated \$40 million for each of fiscal years 2008-2018, to remain available until expended, and it references interest to be credited to the fund.

Section 4(h) states the Secretaries shall, in collaboration with interested-persons, create an implementation work plan and budget to implement the collaborative forest landscape restoration proposal, along with use of a multiparty monitoring, evaluation, and accountability process for not less than 15 years after project implementation commences. The bill also requires the Secretaries to report on accomplishments for collaborative forest landscape projects carried out under the authorities of this legislation.

As previously stated, we support landscape level approaches to land health. The legislation would provide the Secretaries with an additional tool for restoration treatments for priority forest landscapes on public lands. As noted above, however, the Department, through the Wildland Fire Hazardous Fuels Reduction Program and the Healthy Lands Initiative, and the U.S. Forest Service already engage in activities proposed to be included in the bill. Moreover, the FY 2009 budget proposes Ecosystems Services Demonstration Projects in the Forest Service, described in greater detail in the Forest Service's testimony today.

Of particular concern to the Administration is the creation of the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Fund. The bill requires the Fund provide up to fifty percent of the cost of carrying out ecological restoration. It is not clear what mechanism would require Federal agencies to seek partner funding from non-Federal sources. Leveraging Federal funds with non-Federal funds is a vital element to successfully undertaking landscape level restoration projects as it facilitates collaboration and commitment by our non-Federal partners. The bill references interest earned on the fund under section 4(g)(1)(B). The Administration objects to this provision. Amounts available for investment should be limited to funds collected from the public and not to funds appropriated from the General Fund which are not made subject to the appropriations process. We also have concerns that implementation of the bill may be administratively burdensome.

Finally, we are committed to working with the Committee and the legislation's sponsor to ensure that any legislation effectively considers the health and restoration of forests, woodlands and rangelands.

Conclusion

Landscape-scale restoration continues to be a high priority for DOI. In collaboration with our partners, we have made considerable strides in restoring thousands of acres of Federal lands

along with state and privately-owned lands under the jurisdiction of our partners. The DOI will continue to work towards achieving priorities in an effort to make significant improvements in the health and productivity of the public forests, woodlands and rangelands at the landscape level. We look forward to working with the Subcommittee on H.R. 5263. Thank you for the opportunity to testify, I will be happy to answer any questions.